

YOUR TOWN HALL AND HOW IT HELPS YOU



ACTIVITY GUIDE FOR CHILDREN

YOUR TOWN HALL AND HOW IT HELPS YOU

by Jean Richardson

Our schools, parks, public libraries and fire brigades are just a few of the services provided by local government—that is, by councils elected by the people of our towns and countryside. The way in which the duties and services concerned are shared out among the various councils is explained in the *Children's Britannica* article LOCAL GOVERNMENT. This booklet tells you about the work of an English or Welsh county borough council, since this does all the jobs of both a county and a borough council.

County borough councils, which usually run large towns and cities, were first set up at the end of the nineteenth century. The boroughs promoted to this rank belonged to towns which either housed more than 50,000 people or had been of special importance in the past as cathedral cities. If a town wants to become a county borough today, it has to have at least 100,000 inhabitants and get the permission of Parliament, which may decide that to make it independent in this way would involve too many changes for the rest of the area.

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Some examples of county boroughs are industrial centres like Birmingham and Manchester, cathedral cities like Canterbury, Exeter, Gloucester and Lincoln, and seaside places like Blackpool and Brighton. You may not live in a county borough, but all the services described in this booklet will be looked after by some kind of local authority. Try to find out who is responsible where you live.

The plans of the council are carried out by a full-time paid staff, but the actual decisions are made by the aldermen and councillors, who do most of the work in their spare time and are not paid for doing it. They are all local people who are interested in the way their town is run and feel that they know what needs to be done. This could prove disastrous if they were to think only of the improvements which would suit them best, but before they can take office they have to persuade the rest of the people who live in their district that their ideas are really worth carrying out and will be to everyone's advantage.

Some time in May you may have been lucky enough to get the day off from school because it was needed as an election polling station. County borough elections at which the councillors are chosen take place every year. Each councillor remains in office for three years, but to avoid having a completely new and inexperienced council every three years, their terms of office are arranged in such a way that only a third of the councillors are elected each year.

The county borough is divided up into a number of voting districts known as wards, and each ward is represented by three councillors and one alderman. At local government election times the aldermen are given the job of returning officer for each ward. It is they who declare the results of the election, but in practice the town clerk makes the other arrangements, including fixing up the polling stations, seeing that there are people to superintend them and to count the votes at the town hall, and providing ballot papers and secure boxes in which to put them.



The people who vote are known as the electors, and each year the town clerk compiles a register of all their names and addresses. To be included in this register one must be a British subject over 21 years old, and either live in the borough or own or rent property in it. The register is then divided up according to wards, and each polling station is given a list of the people who are allowed to vote there.

The people who stand as candidates must have the same qualifications as an elector and their names have to be put forward by a group of their supporters. The council pays the cost of organizing the election, but the candidates have to pay their own publicity expenses. Usually they like to send the electors a letter explaining who they are and what they would like to try to do. They sometimes hold meetings at which the electors get a chance to ask them questions, and they call on as many people as possible to ask for their support.

As at a general election, most candidates represent one or another of the political parties, which gives them the advantage of the votes of people who belong to the same party. Some people, however, feel that local government is not the place for party politics and that councillors should be free to express their own ideas. Such candidates, who often represent a group like the Ratepayers' Association, are called independents and may be elected because they are well known popular figures and people feel that they really understand local interests.

On polling day each elector who goes to the polling station is given a list of the candidates for his ward. He makes a cross opposite the name he chooses and then puts the slip of paper into a ballot box. His choice is a secret, and no one else can find out for whom he has voted. When polling ends the excitement really begins, for the votes now have to be counted. Supporters of each candidate are present to see that everything is fair,



and the returning officer has the final job of announcing who has been elected.

The right to vote gives all grown-ups the chance to decide who is the best person to represent them, but unfortunately many of them do not bother to use their vote. If more people made an effort to understand local government (as you are doing) perhaps more of them would vote.

Once the election is over the new council meets to decide who shall be mayor. This is usually only a formality because the old council, two-thirds of whom are still in office, have already agreed on who would be the best person and have asked him whether he is willing to accept the position. Being mayor is both a great honour and a great responsibility, because the mayor is the borough's first citizen and its chief representative. During his year of office he has to take the chair at council meetings, attend many official functions such as the opening of new buildings and important social occasions, and entertain distinguished visitors to the borough. He also automatically becomes a justice of the peace, which means that he may have to try cases at the local courts.

In this particular borough the man about to become mayor is Councillor John Smith. He may have a very ordinary name, but John Smith's fortunes turned like those of the legendary Dick Whittington. He left school when he was 14 and had all sorts of jobs before he finally started a business of his own just after the last war. He opened an electrical shop with an army friend who had also been a radio operator, and the boom in goods like radios, television sets and washing-machines brought them success. Mr. Smith first became interested in local government quite by chance. The street lighting outside his shop was poor and the pavement was very uneven so that people often tripped over. Mr. Smith thought something should be done about it, and so he found out who was in charge of lighting and pavements. He got the support of all the shopkeepers, and when he discovered to his surprise that there were no small shopkeepers on the council, he decided to represent their interests himself. He has been a councillor for several years now, and has the reputation of being a practical man who believes in getting things done quickly.

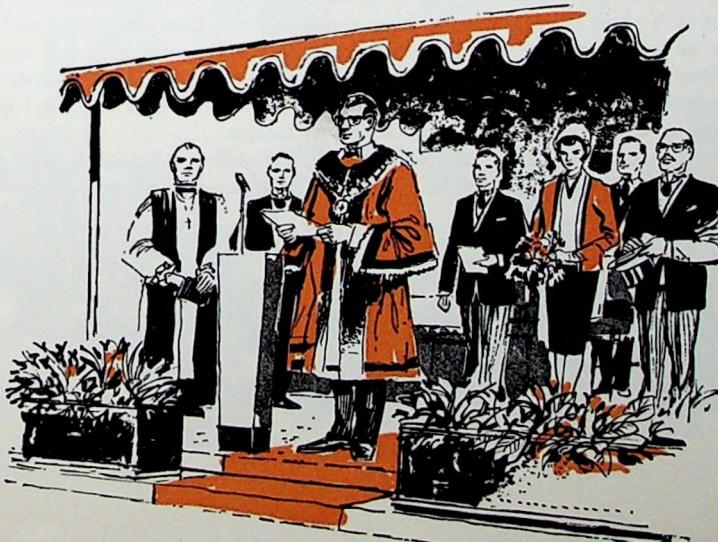
Mr. Smith is very proud of his town which has a long and distinguished history. He feels rather shy at the thought of wearing the scarlet mayoral robes trimmed with fur, and the mayoral gold chain inscribed with

the names of the mayors for the past hundred years, but he is determined to show the town that their council were right in choosing him as mayor.

As he looks round the council chamber Mr. Smith is pleased to see so many familiar faces. A third of those present are aldermen. Their term of office is twice as long as that of a councillor, which gives them the chance to serve as links between successive councils and tends to make them rather more independent. The aldermen are elected by the councillors, who may choose either from among themselves—which causes a by-election—or people outside the council whom they think would be a great asset. Nowadays, however, it is very seldom that anyone from outside the council is elected. Being made an alderman is usually a way of honouring long-serving councillors, who appreciate the chance to continue on the council without having to contest another election. Their duties are the same as those of councillors, except for their special responsibilities at local government elections, when they have to act as returning officers. At parliamentary elections, the mayor is the returning officer, except in towns which have a sheriff.

Mr. Snow, a headmaster, has proved a very useful alderman. His job has given him a real understanding of young people's needs, and his experience in dealing with parents and pupils has taught him the art of making new ideas sound exciting and attractive. Another popular alderman is Mr. West, whose family owns a big department store in the high street. Mr. West's father was once mayor and he carries on the family tradition of public service. He recently presented the park with a number of benches and he always makes a large contribution to the scheme for giving Christmas dinners to old people. He dislikes violent changes, but can always be counted on to support welfare plans.

Mr. Smith is very glad to see his old friend Mrs. Brown among the councillors who have been re-elected. She is a lively energetic little woman



who has done a great deal of public work since her family grew up. She is particularly interested in health precautions and has been a great campaigner for more hygiene in food shops. Another old hand is Councillor Harris, a retired soldier with a very fiery temper. Mr. Smith has had some real battles with him in the past, but he respects his determination to stand up for what he thinks is right. The whole council looks ready to work hard, and Mr. Smith suddenly feels that he is going to enjoy being mayor.

Once the new mayor and aldermen have been chosen, the council has to decide how to share out the work for the coming year. It would be impossible for the council as a whole to discuss all the business which has to be attended to, and so various committees are formed to deal with the main departments. By law every county borough council must appoint a health committee, an education committee, a children's committee and a watch committee (if the borough has its own police force), but they can decide for themselves what other committees are needed.

Each committee has its own chairman, who has to answer for the decisions reached and present them to the rest of the council. Sometimes committees have the power to carry out their own decisions, but usually they have to prepare a report for the whole council's approval. Their meetings may be open to the press and the public, and members are able to go into all sides of the question and raise whatever points they like. Advice on technical matters is given by council officers such as the borough surveyor, the medical officer of health or the education officer. Councillors are usually asked on which committees they would like to serve and their experience and seniority on the council are also taken into account. Sometimes people outside the council, who have some useful qualification, are invited to be on certain committees. They are called co-opted members. Sometimes committees have so much work to do that it is easier for them to divide into sub-committees which can each deal with one section.

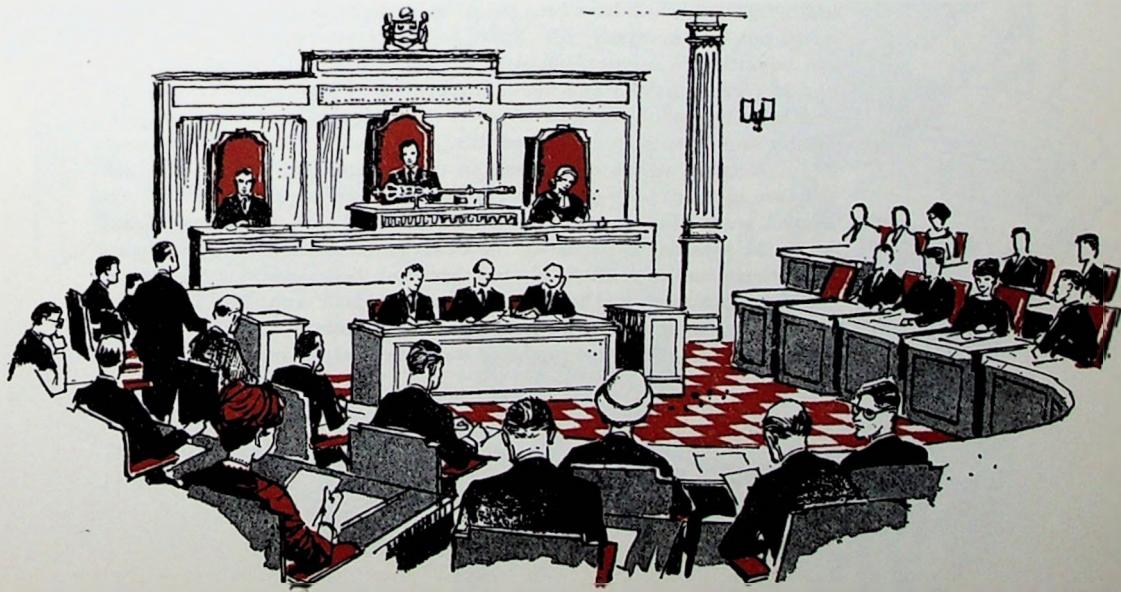
This may all sound a very long-winded way of making arrangements, but it is most important that there should be the time and opportunity for all opinions to be heard. Sometimes there is a general purposes committee, usually made up of the chairmen of all the other committees, which deals with matters like the appointment of staff and makes sure that the various departments do not conflict with each other.

Apart from their committee work, councillors often take part in informal talks which may help to straighten out matters in a friendly

way. Local people with complaints may get in touch with them and they are in a position to find out what the public thinks of the council's latest plans. Thus ordinary people have the chance to influence local government by using their vote and by getting in touch with their councillor if they feel that the council is failing in its duty.

One of Mr. Smith's most important duties will be to take the chair at council meetings, which are held in the council chamber once a month. They are much more formal than committee meetings. The mayor, the town clerk and the aldermen wear their official robes. The mace, a heavy staff made of silver or gold which is a traditional symbol of the mayor's authority, is usually on view. The press and the public are allowed to come, and no secret is made of the council's plans and decisions.

The meeting begins with the approval and signing of the minutes, which are a brief record of what happened at the last meeting. All the councillors have been sent a list of the matters which are to be dealt with,



so that they can decide beforehand whether they have any special points to raise. The newspapers also receive this list. The chairmen of the various committees make their reports and answer any questions about them, and the mayor makes sure that everyone has a chance to speak. The discussions are often very lively and entertaining, and at the end of each item a vote is taken by a show of hands. The committees then have to make sure that the decisions are properly carried out by the officials.

The town hall itself is a modern building in one of the latest styles. There were many protests when the plans were first shown to the public, but they have gradually grown used to its unusual shape and admit that the inside at least is very attractive. Each department has its own set of offices and they have been arranged so that they are easy to find and people no longer have to wander along complicated gloomy corridors. Inside the main entrance is an impressive staircase leading to a large hall which is used for important civic occasions, concerts by the town's excellent orchestra, dances, and plays by local dramatic societies. At the heart of the building is the council chamber. There are many wide windows which give a view over the town, and at dusk, when the street lights have just come on, it looks very beautiful.

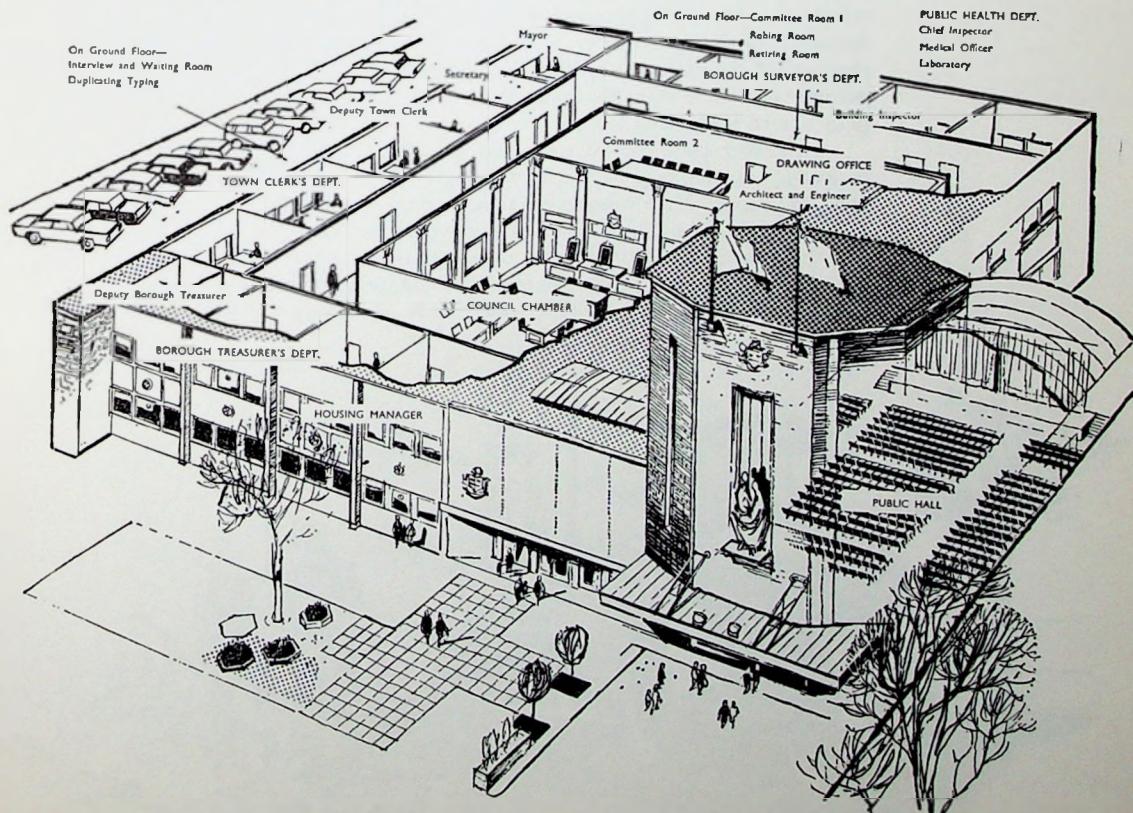
Norman Taylor, the town clerk, has an office on the first floor. He is the council's most important official because he acts as its general manager. As a town clerk has to advise the council on the legal aspects of its business, he is usually a solicitor. (See the article **SOLICITOR**.)

Mr. Taylor usually begins the day by dealing with the many requests and complaints which have been passed to his department. Most of them are sorted out by his deputy, Mr. Price. Some are quite straightforward and can be settled by a letter, but some are better dealt with at an interview, and Mr. Taylor's diary gets full of engagements. He enjoys meeting people and finds that problems can often be solved by an understanding talk; but his time is very precious when there are so many committees to attend.

Keeping an eye on the various departments and making sure that they are in touch with each other gives him a bird's-eye view of how the council works. For example, when the new technical college was being built, the planning department, the education committee and the finance department had to work closely together, and there were many side issues like fire precautions and traffic problems to be dealt with. Mr. Taylor was able to save a lot of time by passing on one committee's ideas to another, and his overall knowledge produced some very helpful suggestions.

Mr. Taylor often needs to consult Edward Hill, the borough treasurer, and the two men have become great friends. Edward Hill is a municipal accountant and figures have always fascinated him. Maths was his favourite subject at school, and he finds managing money an exciting challenge. He has to prepare the annual budget, which shows how much the council expects to spend and what money it has coming in, and he has to check up on all the bills which the council pays. Although he is employed by the council, he has to make sure that they are not misusing the ratepayers' money, and he advises the committees on the financial side of their plans.

Mr. Hill is very concerned about the problem of housing, and he has persuaded the council to use various ways of raising money to build houses and flats. Under one scheme, people with money to invest lend it to the council for a certain number of years in return for a yearly amount of interest. The council then uses the money for building and the rents from



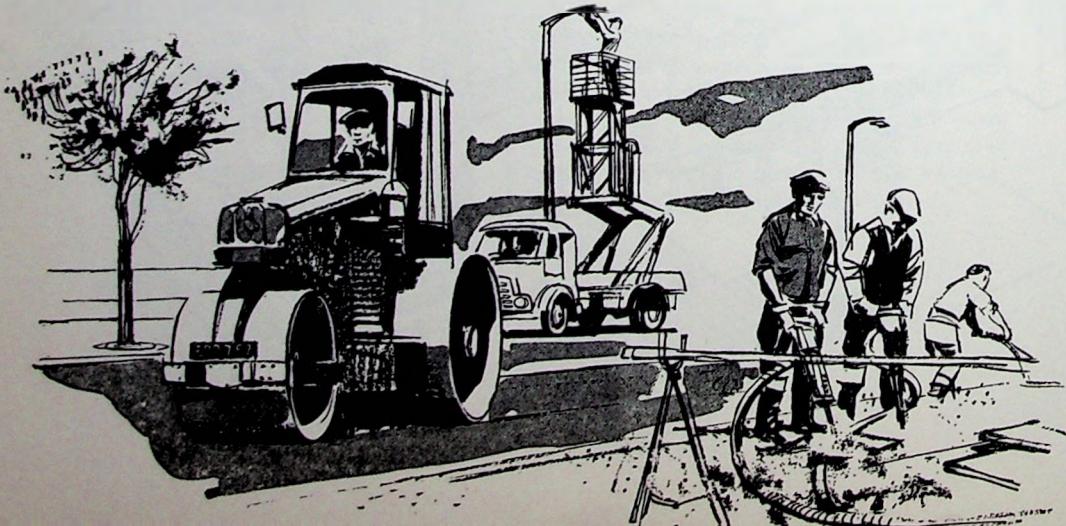
tenants help them to repay the money in time. Mr. Hill has also made it easier for people to borrow money from the council in order to buy a house of their own, and he is always delighted when yet another family is able to settle down. Mr. Taylor and he spend a lot of time discussing plans for the future, and Mrs. Hill sometimes wishes he would make a few plans for the garden instead.

The borough engineer and surveyor, Mr. Walker, is hoping for a mild winter this year. His department is responsible for looking after all the council's property, the streets, bridges, drainage, and sewage disposal plants, and bad weather can multiply their problems overnight. The most important roads, called trunk roads, are taken care of by the Ministry of Transport, but all the other roads in the borough are in Mr. Walker's charge. He sends a regular report of all the repairs and alterations that are needed to the highways committee, who always accept his advice.

They are more interested in discussing ways of improving the appearance of the streets, and they recently had a very heated discussion about street lighting. Some residents who live in the older part of the town had complained about the proposal to replace their old-fashioned lights by modern concrete ones. They said that it would destroy the charming character of their street. Mr. Walker explained that the old lights were not powerful enough to make the road safe for pedestrians, and so the committee sadly agreed to the change.

Another controversial topic was the plan to plant flowering trees in several avenues. Some councillors thought this an unnecessary expense, and were sure that the trees would soon be destroyed by children anyway, but others pointed out how beautiful they would look in spring and thought that the council should try to make the streets look as attractive as possible.

Last year many people complained about the inefficient way in which the council dealt with the snow, which made pavements and roads very





dangerous. One councillor suggested that this year they should make some preparations in advance, and they agreed to allow Mr. Walker some extra money to buy snow-clearing machines. Another problem was what to call the streets on the new housing estate. Suggestions ranged from the names of famous authors to those of rivers and lakes, but finally the committee decided to draw up a list of distinguished local people and call the streets after them.

Ted Lacey, a gardener in the borough's largest park, is a well known local character. He has worked for the council for over 50 years, and he started off as gardener's boy to the wealthy family who once owned the park. When they presented it to the borough Ted went too, and his prize rose-beds are envied by all the local gardeners, who are always trying to discover the secret of his success.

The council owns a number of parks and gardens and spends a lot of money on looking after them. One of the most welcome is the small garden right in the city centre, which is a great favourite with office workers. At lunch-time the seats are always full of people with sandwiches and Thermos flasks.

Alderman West is a very active member of the parks committee, and apart from presenting the council with some park benches, he has taken a great interest in the sports arrangements. He used to represent the county at tennis, and he recently convinced the committee that some new tennis courts were urgently needed. He has plans for rebuilding the main sports pavilion which is old-fashioned and overcrowded. He is hoping that the changing rooms will be made much bigger and some really efficient showers installed.

As the mother of three children, Councillor Mrs. Brown is particularly interested in increasing and improving the recreation centres. Some of the parks have special sections equipped with swings, slides and roundabouts, but Mrs. Brown would like the council to try out some of the exciting new ideas which have been such a success in a nearby town. They

offer strange shapes and bars to climb over, tunnels to explore and materials for building games, and there is a friendly attendant who is always on hand to rescue anyone who gets stuck. Mrs. Brown points out that playgrounds like these cater for imagination and adventure and have been so popular that children really prefer to play there rather than in the street.

The treasurer's concern about housing is shared by the whole council, because housing is their greatest problem. Many people cannot afford to buy a home of their own, however many years they might be allowed to take to pay for it. Council housing is intended as a way of helping people who do not earn high wages or who have a large family to support, by offering them better accommodation at a lower rent than any ordinary landlord could afford. Usually the rents charged do not cover the cost of building the houses and keeping them in repair, and the difference is paid for partly by government grants and partly out of the rates. Some people think it unfair that they should have to pay towards the cost of other people's housing when they themselves may be just as hard up. Ideally, of course, council housing ought to be available to everyone who needs it, but most councils have long waiting lists.

To make sure that the most urgent cases are dealt with first, the council has worked out a scheme which gives priority to families with lots of children and people who live in old unhealthy houses. This means that newly married couples face a wait of several years, and the council recently showed its sympathy for them by trying out a new idea. They put aside about a hundred flats and houses just for newly-weds, and the lucky tenants were chosen by drawing lots. Some people disapproved of this plan, but most young couples felt that at least it gave them a sporting chance.

The council is also ready to help people who want to improve their houses by adding a bathroom, an indoor lavatory, a hot-water system or a larder, by giving them a grant towards the cost. Many old houses which





are otherwise quite sound lack these modern conveniences, but once they have been brought up to date they can be a great help in solving the housing shortage.

It is up to the council to see that the best use is made of all the land in their area, and the bombing of the last war gave many councils the opportunity to put right some of the mistakes of the past. Most towns just grew into shape by chance or were planned in an age which could not foresee modern traffic problems, and reconciling past and present can be a real headache. (See the article **TOWN PLANNING**.)

Mr. Green, the council architect, is a prize dreamer, but he is also a very practical man who has studied city life closely. He enjoys living in a town because he likes the bustle of busy streets. He also appreciates the fine buildings of the past and wants to make sure that new buildings do not make them look insignificant or spoil the view. Many of the plans which are sent in for the council's approval would make efficient enough shops and offices, but from the outside they would look cold and impersonal and do nothing to improve the town's appearance. Mr. Green hopes that people will gradually learn to care about their surroundings, so that architects will have to consider the passer-by as well as the shop and factory owner.

Town planning, however, is not concerned only with appearances. It also tries to look ahead and see how traffic and transport are likely to be affected by future developments, whether schools and churches are being built in the most useful places and whether some neighbourhoods will become too crowded if any more blocks of flats and offices are added.

The council can refuse to grant building permission if they feel that it is not in the town's best interest, and they can also prevent the destruction of any building which they think ought to be preserved. Anyone who is affected by the decision and who disagrees can then appeal to the Minister of Housing and Local Government, who can overrule the council's decision. Sometimes a council might want to build a new road or aerodrome on a site that is unpopular with the local people, who may feel that the traffic would be a menace or that the aircraft would keep them awake. They too can appeal to the Minister. A public inquiry is then held at which

anyone can put forward objections, but the Minister's decision must be accepted as final.

According to Dr. Davies, the medical officer of health, there is nothing like hard work for keeping one healthy. And he should know, because he rarely has a spare moment. He is in charge of all the services which have to be provided by the local health authority, and although hospitals are now taken care of by the Ministry of Health, there is still a lot left to do. (See the article PUBLIC HEALTH.) Many of the services are designed to protect the public against illness. For instance, if anyone catches an infectious disease like smallpox or scarlet fever, the medical officer has to be told so that he can try to stop it spreading. Recently Dr. Davies had several cases of smallpox in the borough and he had to make immediate arrangements for as many people as possible to be vaccinated. It was a real emergency, but he acted so promptly that an epidemic was prevented.

Dr. Davies is very proud of the borough's healthy babies which are a tribute to the work of the clinics. They give medical advice and help to mothers and babies, who both seem to look forward to their regular visits. Dangerous illnesses like diphtheria have now been conquered by immunization, and Dr. Davies is hoping for the same success with polio vaccines. Last year he organized a special anti-polio campaign, and the school health service made sure that all the children knew about it. The council also recently bought a chest X-ray unit, so that serious chest illnesses could be discovered and treated as early as possible.

Services are also needed for patients who are not ill enough to go into hospital but need special attention at home. They are looked after by district nurses, who often have to do jobs like keeping temperature charts, changing dressings or giving injections. Sometimes a family may need someone to help around the house while mother is sick, and this too can be arranged. The council also runs a very efficient fleet of ambulances, which are always ready to answer calls for help.

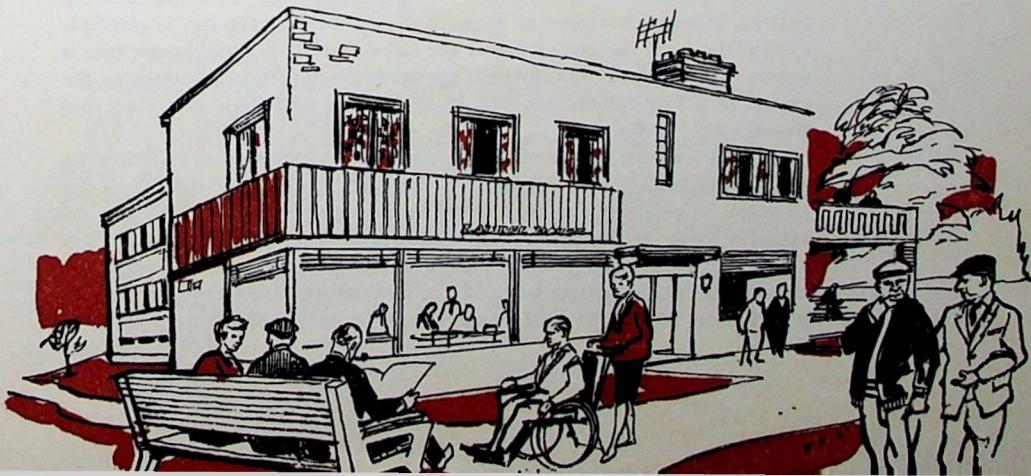


Special attention is given to the problems of children and old people, and there are no longer institutions like the terrible workhouse in which Oliver Twist was brought up. Instead, research has been done into the kind of homes in which old people feel happiest, and this has resulted in a large building programme. Mrs. Clark, for instance, has just moved into one of the new houses which have been designed to make life easier and safer for old people. There is central heating, there are no stairs, and the warden in charge is always ready to give a hand with the shopping or to make arrangements if anyone falls ill. These houses are very popular because they help elderly people to remain independent and still lead their own lives.

Very old people, however, often need to stay in bed more or to be looked after all the time. There were great celebrations at one of the council's homes recently when Miss Archer reached her hundredth birthday. She was delighted with the telegram of congratulation from the Queen, and she invited the mayor and mayoress to her birthday party. The mayor made a little speech in which he said that Miss Archer certainly did not look her age and that she was a splendid advertisement for the home.

The council also has to look after the children who get into trouble or have some misfortune at home. (See the article CHILDREN ACT, 1948.) If a child has committed a serious offence, he may not be allowed to return home. Instead, he will be sent to a remand home where he will be taken care of until the court decides what to do with him. A few councils also run approved schools at which children receive help and discipline and are taught a useful trade.

Sometimes children need looking after for a little while because their parents are ill or for some other reason cannot care for them. The best solution is for them to stay with another family. Mr. Mason, whose job is interviewing people who want to be foster-parents, is always happy when the arrangements are a success. Many children are able to go back to their own parents after a time, but they often become very fond of their foster-parents and like to go back and visit them again.





The council also protects the public's health in many other, less obvious ways. In the past there were epidemics of terrible diseases like cholera, which were caused by the piling up of filth and rubbish in the streets. Such diseases are unknown in this country today because a safe and efficient system for disposing of sewage and rubbish has been worked out and a strict watch is kept on conditions likely to breed such germs. Sanitation and refuse disposal are other jobs looked after by Dr. Davies's department, and the fact that we never have to worry about the dirty water that goes down the pipes and automatically expect our dustbins to be emptied regularly shows how well the whole problem is dealt with. (See REFUSE DISPOSAL and SEWER.)

The council is responsible for providing and maintaining the sewers, large pipes which carry the waste underground to a sewage disposal works. There it flows into enormous tanks, and the solid matter, which sinks to the bottom, is sometimes used as manure. The water on the top is purified, so that the most dangerous germs are killed, and it is then let out into a nearby river. Sometimes untreated sewage is discharged into the sea or the mouth of a large river, and this is one reason why some rivers are not thought fit to bathe in.

Sewers have to be inspected regularly to make sure that they do not get blocked up, and this is not a very nice job because apart from the powerful smell there are often large rats running about. Luckily for the rest of us, however, some people are willing to take on this very important job.

Mr. Hughes, a dustman, sometimes feels that the public do not really appreciate him. He enjoys being out in all weathers and knows he is doing a useful job, but he does wish people would be more considerate. Last week

the bottom fell out of a rusty old dustbin he was emptying, which made him feel cross for the rest of the day. Some people!

Apart from drains and rubbish, there are many other dangerous nuisances which have to be kept in check by the council's public health inspectors. Mr. Morris, for example, deals with complaints about bad food or unhygienic conditions, and Councillor Mrs. Brown and he recently started a campaign to encourage local shops to keep their food as clean and germ-free as possible. Mr. Morris has to make sure that food is not sold on premises which are insanitary or have no adequate washing arrangements, and he also sees that any equipment or wrapping paper used is clean. Sometimes he takes away samples of food to check that it is fit to be eaten, and he has to make sure that the special precautions necessary for food like milk, meat and ice-cream are observed. The local authority also checks up on food and drugs to see that they are properly labelled and that no cheap substitutes have been used.

Another inspector has to keep an eye on cafés and restaurants. Sometimes food poisoning can be caused by food which has been kept too long. Cups and cutlery which are not washed up properly can also soon spread germs. Tracing food poisoning is a matter of great urgency and the inspector has to send the suspected food to a laboratory to be tested. It may not always be the fault of the owner, but if he has not taken the proper precautions he can be prosecuted.

Mr. Morris's colleague, Mr. Jones, investigates other nuisances such as nasty smells, dirty smoke or anything which might be harmful to the town's water supply. Last year, for instance, the council ordered a factory to make some changes in the timing of its work, because it was situated in the middle of a housing area and the noise made by one process woke people up. The council is also very concerned about the problem of air pollution, which causes thick fogs in winter. They are thinking of making



the town a smokeless zone, which means that people will have to give up using wood and coal on their fires; but this needs a lot of consideration because it is very expensive.

Except in the London area, where the Metropolitan Police are directly controlled by a government department called the Home Office, police forces throughout the country are a local responsibility. In county boroughs the police force is organized by the watch committee, which is made up of the mayor and not more than a third of the councillors. Of course the laws are the same everywhere and no watch committee can alter the course of justice, but they appoint the chief constable and the members of his force, and are responsible for seeing that they carry out their duties properly. These duties are fixed by the Home Office, who can interfere if they think that the watch committee is not providing an efficient force. The police wages and conditions of service are also decided by the government, which pays half the cost.

Mr. Adams, the chief constable, is very proud of his men. They have the reputation of being kind and helpful, and their efficiency is shown by the fact that the borough has one of the country's lowest crime rates. Mr. Adams feels it is important that the public and particularly children should think of the police as helpful rather than frightening, so that they will co-operate with them as much as possible. He has given many lectures to schools and firms on ways in which they can help, such as not leaving the back door unlocked or carrying large sums of money around, and he recently organized an open day at police stations so that the public could see what happened when an emergency call was made. He wants his force to have





the most up-to-date equipment and he has just persuaded the watch committee to buy some of the latest radio patrol-cars. (See POLICEMAN.)

Bill Williams has been a fireman for some years now, but he still feels excited when he sounds the fire bell as the engine dashes through the streets. But it is not the same excitement he used to feel as a small boy, because his experience has shown him some of the terrible consequences of fire. The brigade can answer an emergency call within a few minutes, and it has a fine reputation for efficiency and bravery. They sometimes get some unexpected jobs too. Recently Bill had to climb up a tree to rescue a boy who had got stuck while trying to reach a kitten.

Most people only think of firemen as men with hoses and ladders, but they also do all they can to prevent fires from starting. Mr. Wren, the chief fire officer, is very keen on fire protection and makes a regular tour of local offices and factories to see that no stupid risks are being taken and that the staff know what to do in case of fire. He takes special note of any factories which use highly inflammable materials such as petrol, so that he will know exactly what risks are involved should a fire break out. (See FIRE-FIGHTING.)

Everyone can see the point of having police and firemen, but civil defence is a public service that few people appreciate. In the last war air-raid wardens did invaluable work by helping people to make their houses as safe as possible and by rescuing people from bombed buildings, but the terrible possibilities of nuclear warfare have made many people doubt the value of any precautions. (See CIVIL DEFENCE.)

Civil defence is a voluntary service, which means that most of the people taking part are not paid. The council wishes that more people thought it worth while, because although it would be no use where the bomb dropped, some precautions can be taken against the danger of radioactive fallout. Members are trained to give first aid, for example, and to measure the level of fallout. It is, however, the one council service which everyone hopes will never be needed.

Education is one of the council's responsibilities which you probably know about from personal experience. Perhaps your school has the arms of the local authority as its badge, and perhaps you have seen the mayor or some of the councillors at speech-day. The local authorities have to provide all kinds of schools—nursery, primary, grammar, technical, secondary modern or comprehensive—and the Ministry of Education makes sure that they are doing the job properly by sending inspectors to visit the schools. The ministry also gives the council some money towards the cost, because education is a very expensive item. Most councils would like to do away with the ugly and old-fashioned schools of the past and build more of the exciting new designs which are spacious and full of light, but the government puts a firm limit to their building plans.

Old buildings, small playgrounds, not enough gyms and libraries, are only a few of the headaches of Mr. Perkins, the chief education officer. He used to be a teacher himself before he moved over to directing the borough's educational affairs, and he knows just how trying it is to have large classes or to be unable to order the latest textbooks. But although he knows many improvements are needed, there are many things to be proud of. The borough's school meals are among the best in the country. The playing fields could be bigger, but several boys have now signed up with leading football clubs, two boys have joined the county cricket staff and some of the girl sprinters look like future champions. Many more pupils have been getting places at universities, and although it will cost the council a lot of money to pay their fees and give them a grant to live on, Mr. Perkins thinks the money will be well spent.

He is also very glad that he persuaded the education committee to give priority to the new technical college. It offers many opportunities to school-leavers and other students in fields like engineering, electronics, and industrial technology, and means that young people will no longer have to leave their home town to get special qualifications. Another of Mr. Perkins's particular interests is adult education. This can help people who were not able to stay on at school to catch up and take diplomas and degrees in many subjects. Sometimes they just want a new hobby, perhaps a foreign language for next year's holiday, or something unusual like bookbinding or antique collecting. One class very popular with women deals with car maintenance. There are also all sorts of sports available for the energetic. (See EDUCATION.)





Mr. Perkins and his staff are kept very busy with the needs of all these different stages of education. Sharing out the teachers available can be quite a problem, and it is often difficult to decide how to spend this year's money best. The council also runs special schools for handicapped children and extra services like Youth Employment offices which give school-leavers advice about the jobs open to them.

Public libraries, museums and art galleries, which are also part of the borough's education services, are looked after by a separate committee. Today Mr. Perkins has an appointment with Miss Shaw, the chief librarian, who wants to discuss her plans for reorganizing the children's section of the central library. Muriel Shaw has not worked for the council very long, but she is enthusiastic and go-ahead and has already persuaded them to adopt a new system for issuing and stamping library books. Her latest idea is to rearrange the children's books so that they will look more attractive and eye-catching, and to introduce some new furniture and a shelf of reference books on hobbies like loco-spotting, bird-watching and stamp collecting. Miss Shaw is of course responsible for all the borough's public libraries and has a large staff under her, some of whom are studying to become fully qualified librarians like her. She has to decide which books to buy, answer queries and arrange loans of books with other libraries, and see that everything runs as smoothly as possible. She is hoping to get Mr. Perkins's support for her new plan because it will need an extra grant of money.

It will also mean quite a battle with Mr. Fraser, the curator of the town's museum and art gallery, who has been trying to persuade the council to buy some new pictures, some of them by local artists. When Mr. Fraser, who has written a book about the painter Van Gogh, was first appointed, some members of the council thought that art was rather a waste of money. But Mr. Fraser arranged a most exciting exhibition of pictures, old photographs and souvenirs of the town's history, which won him immediate support. He has also given some very popular talks to schools, and the art gallery has gained a lot more visitors. He, Miss Shaw and Mr. Perkins are all united by a secret ambition. One day they hope to persuade the council to build the town a theatre, but there is a lot of stiff opposition to be overcome.

Most of the services and duties described so far have, by law, to be provided by the local authority, but there are also many extras which depend on local conditions, finances and enthusiasm. Some councils, for example, set up information centres to give news of local events and services. Often they produce a booklet which gives an account of the town's history and points out its notable buildings and places of interest, and this can do a lot to attract visitors. Washington Jones, who is a conductor on one of the council's buses, certainly found the booklet interesting. He came over to England from the West Indies because he could not find work there, and he likes working on a bus very much because he enjoys meeting people. The only drawback is that he sometimes finds it a cold job, especially when he is on night duty.

His wife likes shopping in the street market because prices are much cheaper and the cheerful atmosphere reminds her of home. The council has nothing to do with the goods sold, but the stall holders have to get their permission to trade there. People have to apply to the town hall for all sorts of permission. Licences are needed to hire out boats, run a taxi service, open a cinema, an all-night café, a betting shop or an employment agency, and the council may decide that there are already enough. They are also responsible for issuing driving licences.

Joshua and Sarah, the Jones twins, spend a lot of time at the council's new indoor swimming pool. It was only opened last year and has a special paddling pool for small children and a very popular coffee bar. There are





regular swimming and diving lessons, but the Jones twins, who enjoy swimming all the year round, swim like fishes.

One of the twins' first grown-up friends was Mr. Dodds, who is in-charge of the road-crossing outside their school. They had not been used to such traffic at home and found the main road rather frightening, but Mr. Dodds soon took care of them. He used to work as a postman until he retired last year. He found that he missed his daily dose of fresh air, and when he heard that the council needed some more school-crossing attendants, he was glad that he could still do a useful job.

The council is very keen on road safety and has tried out many schemes to persuade motorists to drive safely. They have put up a large sign showing how many people were killed or injured in the previous month, and the figures seem to have made an impression. They feel that school-children in particular should be aware of the dangers of not taking care, and Mr. Wells, a retired policeman, visits schools to give talks on road safety. He has worked out some cycling tests which are held on Saturday mornings. Children who know the Highway Code and whose bicycles are in good order are awarded a special badge.

As you will have gathered from this booklet, the council's chief aim is to safeguard the public and to provide it with the best possible services. If this fails to happen, it is not just because the council and its officials are inefficient, but because the local people in general cannot be bothered to complain or to put forward better suggestions. Most of us like to think of our homes and gardens as expressing our personal tastes and standards. Streets, villages, towns and cities can have personalities, too, if the people who live there will only take enough interest in them.

You will have realized by now that all these services cost the council a lot of money. For some things, such as council houses and flats or council transport, direct charges like rents and fares can be made, but parks, clinics, libraries and most services are provided free. This freedom from charges is deceptive, however, because in fact we have to share the bill by paying rates.

Every year the council works out how much money it will need in the next year. Some of this money will be provided by the government, which contributes towards the cost of items like parks, roads, housing, police and civil defence. There is also a general grant which the council can spend on whatever it likes provided that an Act of Parliament has given it power to do so, but the government keeps an eye on the services provided and makes sure that they are up to standard. Thus no council would be allowed to economize on education in order to be extravagant over something else. The government grants are subtracted from the sum needed for the year, and the ratepayers have to provide the rest.

You may have noticed in advertisements of houses for sale a figure called the gross rateable value. This is not the price of the house but an estimate of the rent which it might fetch, and it is found by a consideration of all sorts of factors such as how many rooms there are, how big the garden is and what sort of a street it is in. When the probable cost of repairs has been deducted the figure remaining is known as the rateable value. Similar values are worked out for all the other buildings, shops, factories or flats in the borough. The borough's total rateable value decides the size of the rates.

The rates are reckoned as so much in the pound. If they are 9s. in the pound, this means that someone whose house is rated at £120 will have to pay £54 a year. The council usually sends out its bills twice a year, and on the back there is a statement of how last year's money was spent. Some councils need much more money than others, and rates vary considerably in different parts of the country. Many people feel indignant when they have to pay the rates, but perhaps they do not realize just how much they are getting for their money.



